

Service of the Heart (עבודת הלב): Exploring Prayer

This week's column was written by Rabbi Samuel Barth, Senior Lecturer in Liturgy and Worship, JTS

"In God's Hand I Place My Soul" (Part 2)

[Last week](#) we took a brief look at the balance between the majestic theological description of God with which *Adon Olam* opens, and the more intimate, even tender recounting of the poet's relationship with God in the final stanzas. These final verses begin with two short words that articulate a quite extraordinary claim: "*Vehu Eli*" (For He is my God).

The three opening stanzas are theologically majestic and poetically lyrical, but they are also dispassionate. Written in the third person, they describe rather than affirm. It is ultimately with the words "*Vehu Eli*" that we move from reflecting about the unity and eternity of God to claiming that God is in unique relationship with each of us. There is powerful intimacy when we say of another human being that *he is my father, she is my mother, this is my friend, this is my beloved*. We claim connection; we proclaim relationship; it is the living relationship that creates the confidence that we can call on God in times of trouble, and entrust ourselves to God even in the dark hours of the night.

I do not imagine that this trust and this relationship necessarily come easily or naturally. Statements of theology can be intellectually complex, but are often spiritually easy. They demand nothing more than the application of the mind. Relationships are not born from the mind; they are born from connection, from care, from desire and yearning. There is no "bridge text" in *Adon Olam* that connects the opening and closing sections; the poet seems to recognize that there can be none.

These words, "For He is my God," challenge us each morning to move beyond an exercise of the intellect and commit ourselves to faith. Perhaps the commitment is fleeting; lasting only a day at a time, to be renewed (like Creation) each day. No one can compel us to believe, no one can bring irrefutable proof upon which we might base our embrace of the living God as our own. But the absence of proof does not mean there is no support, no assistance, and no fellow traveler on the journey toward faith. In every one of our synagogues there are companions in the challenging journey to find personal connection to God.

Let these words, "*Vehu Eli*," serve as a source of recurring invitation and challenge to embrace the Living God in our hearts, our minds, and our souls.

As always, I am interested to hear comments and reflections on these thoughts about prayer and liturgy. You may reach me at sabarth@jtsa.edu.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-yak-hel–Pekudei 5773 Shabbat HaHodesh

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Abigail Treu, Rabbinic Fellow and Director of Planned Giving.

Meaning in Métier

Along with many at my stage of life, I have been following with great interest the spate of articles ruminating on work, family, and the formula for living a meaningful life. From US Department of State Director of Policy Planning Anne-Marie Slaughter's piece questioning how working parents can "have it all" to the notes on the anniversary of writer-activist Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*; from the deep need for job creation, on the one hand, to the need for the caregiving of children and aging parents on the other; from the book tour of Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* to Yahoo President and CEO Marisa Mayer's controversial decline of her own maternity leave and recent revocation of Yahoo's telecommuting policy that enables her staff to work from home, our generation is struggling with work and the broader related question of its place in constructing one's life. This is, of course, not just a women's issue: it is a question all of us ask, whether we are job seekers or job holders, career volunteers or paid professionals, full-time caregivers or people trying to juggle many different kinds of work. It is a basic human question because work is—from the expulsion of Eden on—a basic human need.

Slogging through these mostly nonnarrative sections of Torah, we can lose sight of the fact that this question is at the root of our parashiyot. The midrash suggests that the building of the Mishkan (Tabernacle) was given not because God needed such a thing, but to show the world—Israelites included—that the Israelites had been forgiven for the sin of the Golden Calf. It is curious, though, that such a gesture would be given as a do-it-yourself assignment. After all, if God had wanted to do something to show forgiveness to a people who had just created a golden idol, wouldn't it have made more sense to simply present them with a completed Mishkan, all ready for use in worshipping the one true God? Why issue instructions, and assign a "project manager" and helpers, if not to teach us something about the value of working toward a goal? Perhaps God had learned something about these humans created in God-the-Creator's own

image: that we are not very good at wandering in deserts, no matter how wonderful the final goal (even freedom in our own land, for example) may be. No, we need something to do; some meaningful work with which to keep our hands busy and our minds and souls fulfilled.

Throughout these parashiyot, the terms *khochma* and *khochmat lev* are used to describe who does what. Translated by the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) as “skilled” in a particular craft, the resonance of the words are stunning: they mean “wise” and “wise of heart.” There is a hint here: that the work we do—paid or unpaid, because we have to or because we want to—is most fulfilling when it is heartfelt; when it aligns with some natural aptitude and inclination. How frustrating to be an office worker when you yearn to be an actor, and how unfortunate to be an actor when your greatest strength would be as an administrator behind a desk. We can see in this expression a message about “calling”; that we should strive to be like Bezalel, and set to work doing that which we are called to. Or, perhaps, we read it more broadly (after all, we never do hear from Bezalel on how he felt about his being chosen to direct the building of the Tabernacle) and recognize in these words a message: the real fulfilling work of our lives lies in that which we find most gratifying, in that about which we are *khochmat lev*, be it the volunteer work we do, the time we spend giving to our families, the hobbies we squeeze in or perhaps enjoy only after retirement.

Two verses stand out in our double-portion this week, not only because they give us a brief reprieve of narrative amidst the oh-so-long description of the construction project, but also because they bring to the fore this theme of meaning in métier: “Just as the Lord had commanded Moses, so the Israelites had done all the work. And when Moses saw that they had performed all the tasks—as the Lord had commanded, so they had done—Moses blessed them” (Exod. 39:42–43).

Moses seems as surprised as the rest of us that they did it; that the Israelites actually built the Mishkan exactly as commanded by God. And he blesses them for it. How curious that, after so much frustration with the people, a job well done becomes the source of blessing. The job—upon closer read—was the source of blessing perhaps because it involved not just one but two kinds of work: *avodah* (“work,” as in the JPS translation above) and *melacha* (tasks). *Avodah* in modern Hebrew means “work” (it is the name of the Labor party in Israel), and it also means “to serve God” or “to worship God” (as in the *Avodah* service of Yom Kippur *Musaf*). But that *avodah* is complimented here in our verses with *melacha*, which carries a different spiritual resonance. B. S. Jacobson notes, in his classic *Meditations on the Torah* (124), “Torah uses this term most frequently in relation to three topics: creation, prohibition of Sabbath work, and the construction of the Tabernacle. They are all distinguished by the creative element in work. Human intelligence and creative capacity reflect the godly part of man.” And so we come to understand that work, which is the source of blessing, involves both kinds of “work”—basic labor, perhaps in service to God in a generalized sense, or perhaps entirely secular, but also something elevated, involving that divine spark of the Creator within each of us.

What was Moses’s blessing? Rashi suggests (following the midrash, and citing Psalms 90:17, which itself claims to be a “Prayer of Moses” in its first verse), “Moses said to them: May it be God’s will that the Divine Presence abide in the work of your hands, ‘And let the graciousness of the Lord our God be upon us, and may the work our hands be established; prosper it, the work of our hands.’”

This indeed is the blessing-prayer that guides each of us as we seek to understand our own answers to the questions of finding meaningful work, attaining work-life balance, juggling care for those we love with the need to earn a living, and satisfying the need—grounding it all—to feel fulfilled through our work.

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS

Of Leadership and Investment: A People Engage

Parashat Va-yak-hel-Pekudei continues the building of the Tabernacle—detailing the materials, craftsmanship, appurtenances, and its completion. Far from being the domain of the elite, the building of this dwelling place for God represents an endeavor undertaken by the entire people. We read that

Moses then gathered the whole Israelite community and said to them: These are the things that the Lord has commanded you to do. On six days work may be done, but on the seventh you will have a Sabbath of complete rest Moses said further: This is what the Lord has commanded: Take from among you gifts to the Lord; everyone whose heart so moves him will bring them . . . gold, silver, and copper, blue, purple and crimson yarns. (Exod. 35:1–4)

Why turn to the “whole Israelite community,” and not simply a cabal of leaders, contractors, and artisans to realize this vision? Such a strategy would have been far easier for Moses, limiting the scope of participation to the elites of the community.

French commentator Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor writes that [Moses wanted to be sure] “that individual Israelites could not object and say, ‘God commanded that a Tabernacle be built for Him but did not ask us to bring gifts as donations to it. So we didn’t know . . . and we did not have the privilege of contributing like others.’ Therefore, Moses announced to all of them as one.” In so doing, Bekhor Shor underscores this notion of communal participation. Why did Moses convene the entire Israelite community at the beginning of Parashat Va-yak-hel? Our commentator argues that Moses’s concern is one of inclusion. For such a sacred endeavor, the entire community was convened. Moses, according to Bekhor Shor, was concerned that some Israelites could potentially feel “left out.” For this reason, an announcement was made to the entire people so that, later on, individual Israelites could not object that they knew nothing about the project.

This message is a powerful one about both the involvement of an entire community and transparency. Moses realizes quickly that leadership involves investing the entire community with a sense of inclusion. To achieve this end, Moses deliberately convokes *all* of the people to invite their participation in the building of God’s dwelling place. Clearly, it is everyone’s involvement that underscores the sense of sanctity. God does not and cannot dwell on the shoulders of the few. It is in the midst of community through which God’s Presence resides from generation to generation.

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